

A DREAM

I

BARNARD became conscious that he was dreaming. It was a bad dream, a nightmare.

He had been dreaming for a long time; but at first he had not understood that it was all a dream. It had been too real. When he realized that it was only a dream, he began, as dreamers do, to fight for wakefulness. But sleep held him stubbornly.

His dream was long; it dragged interminably. An endless procession of scenes and events harassed his troubled slumbers. He appeared in these scenes, participated in these events. He was at the same time an actor in his dream, and a spectator.

Some portions of the dream were gay, some were somber; some were happy, some were tragic. But over gay and somber, happy and tragic, there hung an uneasy Cloud. It haunted and harassed him. He tried to escape from this dark Cloud, but he could not. Thus his dream was one long, futile struggle. . . .

II

When the dream began, Barnard seemed in it to be a boy. Yet as an actor in the dream, he felt himself neither boy nor man, simply James Barnard. He was—identity. He was himself.

It was in one of the earliest scenes of his dream that he first discovered the threatening Cloud which was to shadow all the rest.

He seemed to be running desperately after an omnibus, with a door in its rear end. He pursued it at the height of his speed; and yet it drew continually further away, and at length disappeared, in a hazy fashion, at a great distance from him. When at last he abandoned the pursuit, his chest seemed like to burst with his labored breathing.

Two faces looked back at him from the rear windows of this omnibus; and a hand waved through the open door. And above the omnibus, smoothly, and without effort, moved a faint shadow of misty Cloud. It seemed to Barnard to grow darker as the omnibus drew further and further away; and when the vehicle disappeared, the Cloud remained for a moment in his sight before it, too, vanished. There was something menacing about this drifting mist. Barnard thought of it, in his dream, as *The Threat*.

When the omnibus was gone, he remembered the faces which had looked back at him, and recognized them. His mother, and his brother. His brother was a baby.

Barnard, in his dream, felt an overpowering terror at this recognition, and he shuddered.

Then that misty, shadowy picture was gone, and another took its place.

He saw himself at home, sitting in a low chair before a coal fire, with his chin in his hand. His Aunt Joan stood beside him. She was crying, and she kept patting his head.

"You're a brave boy, not to cry," she said to

him, over and over. "You're a brave boy not to cry."

At the same time, she wept bitterly.

Barnard, in his dream, had no desire to cry. He was puzzled and uneasy; he groped for understanding.

Understanding came with a last glimpse of the baby's face in the omnibus, and The Threat gliding above, and then he saw in his dream a bit of yellow paper, and on it, written in a long, flowing, telegrapher's hand, the words:

"Rob died today at noon."

He understood that Rob was his baby brother; and he understood, from that time forward, the nature of The Threat. . . .

III

Thus, his dream, even while he was still a boy in it, was always disturbing and perplexing. He was uneasy, rebellious. He chafed and suffered and could not find relief. The dream world was hostile and mocking, full of inscrutable forces which were stronger than himself.

But he could not wake up. The dream dragged him inexorably onward. He was like a man bound to the stirrup of a horse, jerked forward constantly, and meeting each instant new blows and pains.

Abruptly, at length, as when at dawn the sun strikes low and sweet across the dewy fields, the complexion of his dream was altered. He smiled in his sleep, and he felt warm and comforted. He

did not know why this was so, and at first he did not care.

He had been conscious that his dreams were of a more pleasant hue for some time before he discovered that this new aspect was shared with him by another. A girl.

He saw her very plainly, and there was something familiar about her, and at the same time something baffling. He felt that he ought to recognize her, that he ought to know her name. He tried to remember it, but he could not.

So he set this problem aside, and gave himself up to enjoyment of the dream with her. He could see no more of her than her face, her eyes. They were near each other, yet aloof. Their hands never touched, they never spoke; yet their eyes met frequently.

He had at first no desire to approach this girl more than closely; and she, also, seemed content to go forward with him, side by side, near, yet not together.

After a time, the mists cleared a little, and he saw that they were passing through a pleasant, rolling meadow. Her feet followed a little pathway; and when he looked down, he saw that his feet, also, were set upon a path.

He felt his father and mother somewhere near him, but he could not see them. He could only see the girl.

Suddenly, he perceived that his path and the path the girl followed drew ever nearer together. This frightened him; but when he looked toward the girl and saw that she, too, was a little frightened, he smiled reassuringly, and waved his hand

to her, and went boldly forward along the way that was before him.

The girl had hesitated, but when she saw him go forward, she no longer faltered. She moved with him.

Their paths met at a little turnstile in a fence. Their paths met there, and they met there.

For a moment, they looked at each other. Then their eyes went forward through the next field. There were no longer two paths before them. In the next field, there was but one. Either they must now go forward together, or one of them must fall behind forever.

So they clasped hands and passed through the stile.

The field disappeared. The girl stood beside him, her right hand in his right hand, her eyes turned up to his. Her eyes were deep, his were lost in them.

A voice spoke, resonantly, in measured words. He heard his own voice; then the girl's.

Suddenly he recognized the girl. She was Anne; she was his wife. . . .

IV

They went forward singing, for a little way. Their hands were lightly clasped. The girl skipped and danced beside him; and though he walked sedately, his heart sang and danced with hers.

Then he felt a damp chill in the air, and Anne drew closer to his side, and she no longer danced.

At first he did not understand; but when he

looked about them, and then up into the skies, he saw the misty Cloud, The Threat. . . .

He had forgotten the very existence of this Cloud; and he rebelled furiously at its coming now. But it paid no heed to him. It hung not over his strong head, but over the head of Anne, his wife.

Anne saw him looking up at it, and she lifted her head to see what he had seen; but he drew her eyes quickly away so that she should not understand, and with ice at his heart he went forward, watching the thing above them.

He began to reach upward, behind Anne's back, and try to thrust The Threat away; but it was beyond his reach. It hung relentlessly above Anne's head, and he could not touch it. He strove, he stood on tiptoe, he pleaded. . . .

Anne turned and saw him; and she dropped her hand on his arm and reassured him. But when he looked into her eyes, he saw the reflection of The Threat there.

Nevertheless, they went bravely forward, shoulders touching; and when presently the Cloud descended and cloaked them so that he could not see Anne, he still held her hand, and they spoke to each other through the shadows.

Then the Cloud lifted, and when Barnard looked down, he saw a little child walking by Anne's side, holding her hand.

He forgot The Threat in the air above them, and took the other hand of the child, and hurried forward. . . .

V

Thereafter, the threatening Cloud was never out of their sight. At times it hung low above them, at times its cold fingers touched them; and in the intervals it rode high above their heads, distant, but relentless.

His dream was a constant apprehension; he kept a persistent vigil against The Threat, even while his heart told him it was a hopeless one.

When the Cloud hung low above them, he cast his arms about Anne and the child until the mists lifted again. Once, when this happened, and when they started forward once more, he found that not one boy-child, but two walked between Anne and him. Their hands were clasped, and Anne held the hand of one, and he of the other, so that they four went forward together, each helping each.

Their path was rocky and beset. The Threat never left them; and stones rose to trip them, and thorny bushes clutched at them from either side. . . .

VI

For a long time, in his dream, he always felt his father and his mother near at hand. Sometimes their fingers touched his. Sometimes, his father's firm clasp lifted him over an obstacle in the way; and sometimes his mother's smile tried to smooth away the bruises he encountered in the path.

His mother and his father loved to cast their arms about the two children, while he and Anne watched proudly.

While they all stood thus one day, The Threat descended upon them, lightly, gently; and thereafter Barnard was unable to find his father or his mother. He looked for them and could not see them; but at times he seemed to hear their voices, speaking to him. . . .

The Threat in the air seemed to mock him; and he perceived that it would never leave him. He must walk forever in its shadow, till he should awake.

A great throng of memories roared down upon him; their wings buffeted his head. They were memories of things he might have done and had not done; of things he had done of which there was no need. They concerned his father and his mother, and they tormented him.

Then Anne's hand lay lightly on his arm, and he was mysteriously comforted and reassured.

VII

Once another child came to walk with them. This child was very little, and it walked between his two tall sons, and they held it by the hands and guided its stumbling and uncertain steps.

This child laughed easily, and when it laughed, they laughed with it, because they could not help themselves.

In his dream, Barnard forgot for a moment The Threat which drifted above them, and he began to sing, and Anne sang with him. And the three boys, his sons, laughed as he and Anne sang. Their voices were like peals of music.

Then something brushed Barnard's cheek, and

before he could stir, The Threat had engulfed them all. It crushed down upon them, stifling and smothering and blinding them.

He fumbled desperately through this Cloud, seeking the others. He found Anne, and they clung together, and groped about. . . .

"Here is Dick," she called, and laid the hand of his eldest son in his; and a moment later he felt a straight, youthful shoulder, and when he peered through the mists, he saw that he had found Charles, the second son, and he called to Anne, as she had called to him:

"Here is Charles!"

They were glad at that; and they went more hopefully at their task of finding the little child; but while they were still searching, the Cloud lifted, and they saw that the little boy was gone.

VIII

Barnard, in his dream, began to feel old; and he began to feel lonely.

He missed the laughter of the little child. Even though Anne, and Dick, and Charles still walked with him, he missed the little child.

He could see in Anne's eyes that she, too, was lonely, but when he taxed her with it, she gave him a gay denial.

The two boys, however, soon forgot. At first Barnard resented this; then he accepted it dumbly. Revolt was dying in him. He still went forward as steadily as before, but the old, fierce defiance no longer burned in his breast. He no longer sought to escape The Threat above them. He ac-

cepted its presence. Submission was born in him.

The Threat rode high and serene above their heads. . . .

In his dream, he thought they went forward for a long time together, through the fields. There were not so many stones in their path, not so many thorns to snatch at them. Barnard took pleasure in lifting the stones and tossing them aside, and he found joy in lopping off the thorns. He was, in some measure, happy.

Then, one day, he spoke to Charles, and the lad did not hear him, did not reply.

He looked at the boy in surprise; and he saw that Charles was looking off across the field through which they passed. His eyes followed his son's eyes, and fell upon a girl child walking in the field, a little way off.

She followed a path parallel to theirs, and she was answering Charles' eyes with her own.

Barnard called to Charles again, more loudly; and this time the boy heard, and turned, and answered him. But his eyes went back to the girl as soon as he had answered.

Then suddenly, they came to a place where a narrow path led off from the broad one they were following, and went toward the girl's path; and here Charles stopped. He looked along the narrow way.

"This is my path," he said.

Anne did not understand. She put her arm around Charles' shoulder. "No, son," she said. "The broad way is ours."

"Go on, Charles," Barnard told his boy, impatiently. "The broad path, Charles. Go on."

But their son shook his head stubbornly; and his eyes were meeting the eyes of the girl, across the field. Barnard started to protest in anger; but Anne looked at her son, and saw whither his eyes led; and she followed his eyes and saw the girl.

The girl smiled at Anne, very humbly and beseechingly; and Anne put her hand to her throat and trembled.

Then she turned to Barnard, nodding ever so little; and she reached up to brush back a lock of hair upon the forehead of her tall son, and she buttoned a button of his coat.

"Go bravely, Charles," she whispered. "Good-by."

He kissed her hurriedly. "I'll be back," he promised. "I'm not going far away from you."

Anne shook her head wistfully; but Charles was already running down the narrow path and did not see; and when Dick shouted after him, Charles did not hear.

They watched, and after a little they saw Charles and the girl come together; and presently their son and the strange girl went happily off across the meadow, out of their sight, hand in hand. . . .

IX

When Barnard, and Anne, and Dick went on, Barnard thought in his dream that he and Anne held Dick's hands more tightly than before. And when, presently, he saw another girl, walking

alone upon a distant path, he caught Anne's eye behind Dick's back, and pointed this girl out to her.

Then he and Anne conspired against their son; they left the broad path for another, narrower. They pointed out to Dick the wonders of the way, and talked eagerly to him, and caressed him.

But after a time, they saw that the girl's path had curved to follow them; and at length, while they spoke together, Dick turned to look back, and his eyes met the eyes of the girl . . .

X

Thereafter Barnard and Anne moved alone together; and though Barnard, in his dream, felt Anne's hand in his, his heart ached with loneliness. Anne smiled bravely beside him, but her smile was worse than tears.

They seemed to have lost their path. They no longer went confidently along a broad way, but wandered aimlessly this way and that. They tried new paths that led nowhere; and there were times when they stood still, clinging each to each.

The Threat above them, Barnard saw, was floating lower.

In his dream, Barnard thought that he and Anne came to a path which followed the brink of a great precipice. They walked that way. His arm was about her, hers clasped him. She was talking very gaily; she had never been so beautiful.

Barnard forgot The Threat for a moment; and when uneasy recollection returned to him, and his

eyes sought for it, he saw that the cloudlike thing had descended till it rode level with them, and at one side, above the abyss at their left hand. It hung there, following them as they followed the brink of the precipice.

He was afraid, but he tried to tell himself this was a victory, that The Threat was leaving them; and he pointed it out to Anne. In his dream, he thought she looked up to him, and he saw pity in her eyes, and so he was more afraid than before.

He watched the cloudy thing more closely; and presently he saw that it was drifting toward them. So he caught Anne's hand, and hurried her forward. She ran with him, as though to humor him; and she was speaking comfortingly to him as they ran.

The Cloud moved swiftly closer till it touched Anne. And her steps faltered. He could no longer persuade her to run. He could only throw his arms about her; and in his dream he shouted defiance at The Threat.

Then he pleaded with it. . . .

Anne was being drawn from his arms. It was not that she was torn away; it was just that he could no longer hold her. The solid substance of her, to which he clung, melted in his arms. He tore off his coat and wrapped it about her, but still she slipped away like sand through the fingers.

He begged; and her face came toward him, and her lips touched his. Her fingers rested for an instant on his eyelids.

When they were lifted, and he opened his eyes again, Anne was gone.

He threw himself toward the brink of that precipice to follow her; but the chasm had disappeared. Where it had been, there was only a sweet meadow, mockingly beautiful in the sun.

He looked about him. All the world was beautiful as ice.

XI

The world in which Barnard walked when Anne was gone was full of people. While Anne had been with him, there had seemed to be no one else in the land save himself and Anne. But now the paths were full of folk who moved steadily this way and that.

They did not see Barnard. At first he spoke to them, but he found they did not hear. They were absorbed, each in each. After a time he gave over accosting these people and began to hunt for his sons. But he could not find them.

And so he went forward alone, and very lonely. This was the worst part of Barnard's dream.

He was so much alone that even The Threat had left him. He missed it. Its absence was more terrible than its presence had been. He longed for it to return, and he sought for it; and then, one day, it appeared in the air, high above him.

It was very beautiful, much to be desired. He wondered that he had never perceived its beauty in the past. It was no longer a threat; it was something kinder.

But it rode high above Barnard, seemed not to perceive him.

Barnard tried to wake and could not; and then he saw that he could only wake by coming closer

to the Cloud that had been a threat. He climbed a little hill and called to it; but it rode serenely on, not regarding him.

When it had passed the hill on which he stood, it went more swiftly, and Barnard was fearful that it would vanish again. He ran after it. It was the only friendly and familiar thing in this world without Anne. He could not bear to lose it. By and by he seemed to be overtaking it; and abruptly he plunged into the cool sweetness of its embrace.

It blinded his eyes, and he began to fall; and at the end of his fall, he awoke.

For a moment after his waking, Barnard lay shuddering at the horror of his dream. The loss of Anne had been so terribly real that at first he scarce dared reach out in the darkness for her head upon the pillow beside him.

But after a moment he became conscious of the soft warmth of her body there; and he caught the sound of her slow and pleasant breathing; so he fumbled and found her hand and held it and was comforted.

The touch of his hand seemed to wake her; her fingers answered his with a loving pressure, and she said reassuringly to him:

"All right, Jimmie."

He leaned in the darkness and found her lips and kissed her. "All right, Anne," he replied. "Just a bad dream."

He heard her laugh softly; and at the sound of her gentle mirth he felt strangely humble. "What is it, Anne?" he begged.

"I, too, dreamed," she told him. "I woke before you; that is all. In the morning you will understand."

"Understand?" he pleaded; and he was trembling with eagerness for this understanding which was already in some parts revealed to him.

"That though it seemed so long, and seemed so real, it was after all but the matter of an instant's dream," she told him lovingly. Her hand was on his hair as it had used to be. . . .

So he began to understand; and he held tight to Anne's hand for a space; and presently they slept for a little time, and woke in the glory of the risen sun, to begin together the new Day.